



STATE OF ILLINOIS

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**STATEMENT OF
ILLINOIS LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR PAT QUINN
BEFORE
THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23, 2004

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Evans, my Chicago neighbor Congressman Gutierrez and other members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you inviting me to address this Committee today on behalf of the Council on State Governments, the National Lieutenant Governors Association and the nearly 400,000 National Guard members and reservists called to active duty since the events of September 11, 2001.

In January of this year, I traveled to Baghdad to spend the holidays with our troops. As the first statewide elected official to tour the combat zone, I bunked in military tents and joined the troops at their mess halls for meals. I witnessed first-hand the difficult conditions they confront daily, as well as their determination and resolve.

I told the Illinois National Guard members and reservists who I encountered about the innovative "Illinois Military Family Relief Trust Fund" set up this year to lend a helping hand to the families of those called to active duty. My message to the hundreds of troops I met with – particularly the citizen soldiers who abruptly left behind families and jobs – was simple: "We've got your back."

The two bills this Committee is considering – the "*Patriotic Employer Act of 2004*" and the "*Safeguarding Schoolchildren of Deployed Soldiers Act of 2004*" – are just two common sense ways for us to assure citizen soldiers that "we've got your back", and I strongly urge your support for these initiatives.

The "*Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act*" (USERRA) is increasingly important as more and more National Guard members and reservists are called up. However, USERRA's protections are limited to citizen soldiers called to active duty status once they are employed.

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Discrimination against National Guard members and reservists who are prospective employees persists, so in the Land of Lincoln we recently approved the landmark *"Illinois Citizen Soldier Initiative of 2004"* which amends our state Human Rights Act to outlaw discrimination against Guard members and reservists in hiring practices, job promotions, housing opportunities and financial lending.

My office has gone to bat for several service members who became victims of employment discrimination when they answered the call to duty. One case involved Jeremiah Johnson, an Illinois National Guard member who was a Rockton, Illinois police officer. When his unit was activated, the police chief fired him in clear violation of USERRA. The Illinois Attorney General and my office have intervened, and Officer Johnson has gone to federal court to be reinstated to his job.

Another case was that of SFC Anthony Markucaitis, a 56-year old Vietnam vet from a Chicago suburb, whose employer notified him on November 11, 2003 - Veterans' Day - that he had been terminated since his tour of active duty had extended beyond the company policy of nine months. SFC Markucaitis was in Iraq on active duty at the time, so my office worked with his employer - a major insurance company - to rescind the termination.

Employers who value and protect any citizen soldiers in their workforce are to be commended. But every employer, supervisor and floor boss in the United States is hereby put on notice that discrimination against National Guard members and reservists will not be tolerated.

The "Patriotic Employer Act" reinforces that message loud and clear. Rights are often violated by frontline supervisors who just don't understand the law. House Bill 4477 ensures awareness of the law. Employers already post information about job safety, equal employment opportunity laws, rights of the disabled and other protective statutes, so this initiative should earn widespread support.

The anxiety, loneliness and tough financial times often experienced by the children of citizen soldiers are sometimes compounded by a change of residence due to the military service of one or both of the child's parents. Perhaps a child is forced to move to another town or state to live with relatives when the parent is called up. The *"Safeguarding Schoolchildren of Deployed Soldiers Act of 2004"* (House Bill 3779) requires local public school districts to waive residency requirements and fees for such cases. In one Illinois county, for example, the non-resident fee is \$7,000! House Bill 3779 remedies this.

At least 40 percent of National Guard and reservists families suffer financially when the breadwinner is called to active duty due to the disparity between military salary and civilian pay.

In Illinois, we've spearheaded the effort to set up the innovative Illinois Military Family Relief Fund to aid the families of National Guard members and reservists. More than \$1.3 million has been distributed to 2,500 families to help with rent, utility bills and other expenses.

We've been working with other lieutenant governors and public officials - Republicans and Democrats alike - to set up our model Military Family Relief Fund in other states across the nation. Two states – Maine and Wyoming – have already enacted their own versions of the Military Family Relief Fund, a similar bill awaits the Governor's approval in South Carolina, and legislatures in ten other states are now considering it. Also, the National Lieutenant Governors Association unanimously passed a resolution endorsing the concept of state Military Family Relief Funds.

This is a national grassroots movement, and to learn more about “protecting those who protect us”, I invite you all to visit a website set up by my office (www.OperationHomefront.org) which informs military personnel of their rights and describes how everyday citizens can help the troops. Having registered more than 7.2 million hits, the site is among the most frequented military sites in government.

As Congressmen Evans and Gutierrez know, President Abraham Lincoln reminded us of our duty as citizens to “...*care for them who have borne the battle.*” The legislation before you today helps us carry out his message, and signals our citizen soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and other war zones that ‘we’ve got your backs.’

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